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Abrams, CIA said to plan contra aid

By Robert Parry,
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WASHINGTON - The State Department's chief official on Central America and the CIA officer in charge of the Nicaraguan rebels worked closely with then-White House aide Oliver L. North in controlling what the administration claims was private military aid for the contras last year, according to administration and other sources.

One private American source in the aid network described the three officials as "a triad" who made all key decisions on the contras, including an American distribution of weapons from an allegedly private aid network during a congressional ban on direct and indirect US government military assistance.

Besides North, who was fired Nov. 25 for his role in allegedly diverting Iranian arms sales profits to aid the contras, the officials are Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, and the CIA officer now directing the contra operation, according to the sources who insisted on anonymity.

The CIA officer belongs to the spy agency's clandestine services, and the Associated Press decided to withhold his name.

This trio oversaw the air-resupply operation that included the arms-laden cargo plane shot down over Nicaragua Oct. 5, resulting in the death of two Americans and the capture of Eugene Hasenfus, who subsequently was released by Nicaragua.

One well-placed administration source confirmed that the three officials managed the arms

flow to the rebels during the time when Congress had banned military aid. Another knowledgeable administration official said

Abrams participated in decisions about the "private" aid network, but North handled the operation's details, including what to do after the resupply operation was exposed Oct. 5, when Hasenfus' cargo plane was shot down over Nicaragua.

North, Abrams and the CIA officer served together on a senior interagency group on Nicaragua, said the sources who insisted on anonymity.

Despite participation by the three in overseeing the air-resupply mission, the White House has asserted that it complied with a two-year congressional ban against military aid to the contras. During most of last year, US officials were permitted only to give the rebels nonlethal "humanitarian" aid.

The sources close to the contra aid program said Abrams had detailed knowledge about the air resupply mission based at El Salvador's Ilopango military airfield when he testified before a House

Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Oct. 15 that he did not know who "organized and paid for this flight," referring to the flight shot down Oct. 5.

Abrams did not respond to repeated requests for comment this week. CIA spokeswoman Kathy

Pherson said the agency had complied with congressional restrictions, but she would not discuss the CIA officer's activities. North has refused to talk with the press and has invoked his Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination before Congress.